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S E C R E T ROME 005599

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DELIVERY OF PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE TO PM BERLUSCONI

REF: WHITE HOUSE 150626ZNOV02

CLASSIFIED BY: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION EMIL SKODON, REASON 1.5 (D)

1. (S) AMBASSADOR, ACCOMPANIED BY DCM, MET WITH PM BERLUSCONI AT CIAMPINO AIRPORT LATE EVENING OF 15 NOVEMBER TO DELIVER PRESIDENT BUSH'S MESSAGE ON THE PRAGUE NATO SUMMIT AND TO DISCUSS OTHER ISSUES (SEPTTEL). BERLUSCONI WAS MAKING A SHORT  
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TRANSIT STOP AT CIAMPINO ON THE WAY TO HIS HOME IN SARDINIA FROM AN OFFICIAL VISIT TO SKOPJE. BERLUSCONI'S DIPLOMATIC ADVISOR CASTELLANETA AND CHIEF OF STAFF VALENTINI WERE ALSO PRESENT.

2. (S) BERLUSCONI DESCRIBED THE PRESIDENT'S DECISION TO SUPPORT THE NATO CANDIDACY OF SEVEN ASPIRANT COUNTRIES AS "GOOD NEWS," AND SAID HE WAS IN COMPLETE AGREEMENT. REFERRING TO THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN INITIATIVE SUMMIT FROM WHICH HE HAD JUST COME, BERLUSCONI OBSERVED THAT ALL OF THE NON-NATO COUNTRIES AT THE SUMMIT WANTED TO BE IN NATO SOMEDAY. IT WAS CLEAR, HOWEVER, THAT IT WOULD BE A LONG ROAD FOR MANY, SUCH AS MACEDONIA, GIVEN THEIR LOW LEVEL OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. BERLUSCONI ALSO PICKED UP ON (AND APPRECIATED) THAT PORTION OF THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER WHICH COMMENDED HIM FOR REJECTING PROPOSED CUTS IN GOI DEFENSE SPENDING, COMMENTING THAT HE WANTED TO INCREASE DEFENSE SPENDING LEVELS IF HE COULD, NOT JUST MAINTAIN THEM.

3. (S) AMBASSADOR BRIEFED DEFMIN MARTINO ON CONTENTS OF THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER THE FOLLOWING DAY, SATURDAY THE 16TH, IN A CONVERSATION AT THE AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE. DCM WAS ALSO PRESENT. MARTINO WELCOMED THE NEWS OF THE PRESIDENT'S DECISION ON THE SEVEN ASPIRANT COUNTRIES. REGARDING DEFENSE SPENDING LEVELS, MARTINO SAID HE HAD FOUGHT HARD AGAINST PROPOSED DEFENSE CUTS IN THIS YEAR'S GOI BUDGET SUBMISSION, AND HE WOULD CONTINUE TO LOOK FOR INCREASED SPENDING OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS TO MEET NATO CAPABILITY COMMITMENTS.

4. (S) THE DEFMIN NOTED THAT HE HAD AGREED TO FOUR OF THE FIVE SPECIFIC CAPABILITY PRIORITIES FOR ITALY PROPOSED BY  
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LORD ROBERTSON, BUT COULD NOT SIGN UP TO THE GOI SPENDING MORE ON STRATEGIC AIRLIFT SINCE CURRENT GOI ASSETS (PRIMARILY C-130J'S) WERE SUFFICIENT. IN FACT, MARTINO SAID, STRATEGIC LIFT WAS ABOUT THE ONLY AREA WHERE THE MOD DID NOT NEED TO SPEND MORE. WHEN MORE LIFT ASSETS WERE NEEDED, THE GOI COULD RENT ANTONOV'S AS IT HAD IN THE PAST. MARTINO OBSERVED THAT IF YOU ONLY USE A CAR A FEW TIMES A YEAR, IT MAKES SENSE TO RENT INSTEAD OF TO BUY; AS FAR AS HE WAS CONCERNED, THE SAME PRINCIPLE APPLIED TO ADDITIONAL AIRLIFT ASSETS. NOTING THAT GERMAN CHANCELLOR SCHROEDER WAS SEEKING TO SPEAK WITH PM BERLUSCONI ABOUT NATO CAPABILITIES, MARTINO SHARED HIS SUSPICION THAT SCHROEDER INTENDED TO PUSH BERLUSCONI TO REVERSE THE GOI DECISION NOT TO BUY A-400'S, IN ORDER TO TAKE THE PRESSURE OFF GERMANY TO PURCHASE MORE. MARTINO WONDERED ALOUD IF SAVING THE A-400 PROGRAM MIGHT BE THE REAL MOTIVE BEHIND LORD ROBERTSON'S PITCH TO THE GOI TO ACQUIRE MORE AIRLIFT CAPABILITY.  
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